

Seeking to be the 'perfect parent' not always good for new moms and dads

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Parents of newborns show poorer adjustment to their new role if they believe society expects them to be "perfect" moms and dads, a new study shows.

Moms showed less confidence in their parenting abilities and dads felt more stress when they were more worried about what other people thought about their [parenting skills](#).

However, self-imposed pressure to be perfect was somewhat better for parents, especially for fathers, according to the results.

The findings are some of the first to show how the quest for perfectionism affects first-time parents, said Meghan Lee, lead author of the study and a graduate student in human development and family science at Ohio State University.

"Trying to be the perfect parent is a mixed bag," Lee said.

"If you think you have to be perfect because of outside pressure, it really hurts adjustment. If you put these demands on yourself, it may have some benefits early on, but it is not universally good."

Lee conducted the study with Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, associate professor, and Claire Kamp Dush, assistant professor, both in human development and family science at Ohio State.

Their results appear online in the journal [Personality and Individual Differences](#) and will be published in a future print edition.

This study is part of a larger, long-term "New Parents Project" that is studying how dual-earner couples adjust to becoming parents for the first time.

For this study, the researchers examined 182 couples who became parents between 2008 and 2010.

In the final trimester of the woman's pregnancy, both spouses completed a [questionnaire](#) measuring their levels of both societal-oriented and self-imposed parenting perfectionism.

Societal-oriented perfectionism is "being concerned about what other people think about your parenting," Schoppe-Sullivan said. It was measured by asking people how much they agreed with statements like "Most people always expect me to always be an excellent parent."

Self-oriented perfectionism was measured with statements like "I must always be a successful parent."

Three months after the birth of their child, the same couples answered questions about their adjustment to their new roles.

The results showed that the parents' perfectionistic tendencies were associated with how well they adjusted.

Mothers who had higher levels of societal-oriented perfectionism also tended to have lower levels of self-efficacy about their parenting.

"That means they didn't have as much confidence in their ability to perform their tasks as mothers," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

For fathers, societal-oriented perfectionism was associated with higher levels of parenting stress.

Self-oriented perfectionism was linked to [higher levels](#) of parenting satisfaction for mothers, but it had no effect on their self-efficacy or stress.

For fathers, self-oriented perfectionism was related to better adjustment in all three areas: higher satisfaction, lower stress, and higher parental self-efficacy.

The researchers measured and controlled for two personality factors – conscientiousness and neuroticism – that are also linked to parental adjustment. For that reason, the researchers are more confident that parental adjustment is indeed related to perfectionism and not to other factors.

The data from the study can't tell us why fathers were more likely than mothers to benefit from the self-imposed perfectionism, according to the researchers.

One reason may be that these fathers were highly involved in parenting, and having these high standards motivated them.

But Schoppe-Sullivan said the reason may also have to do with the fact that fathers still don't carry the same burden for childcare that mothers do in our society.

"Some fathers may have these very high standards for themselves, but it may not be as hard for them to meet those standards as it is for mothers," she said.

"Fathers generally aren't expected to have as much responsibility for

taking care of their children."

Lee noted that this study examined parents just three months after their child was born, so it is possible that the role of perfectionism may change over time. Even though self-oriented perfectionism had some positive effects at this early point in parenthood, things may change.

"What's going to happen to adjustment when these moms and dads start having problems and failures, as all new [parents](#) inevitably do? It may be that self-oriented [perfectionism](#) will no longer be a good thing in the face of these failures. We just don't know yet," Lee said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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